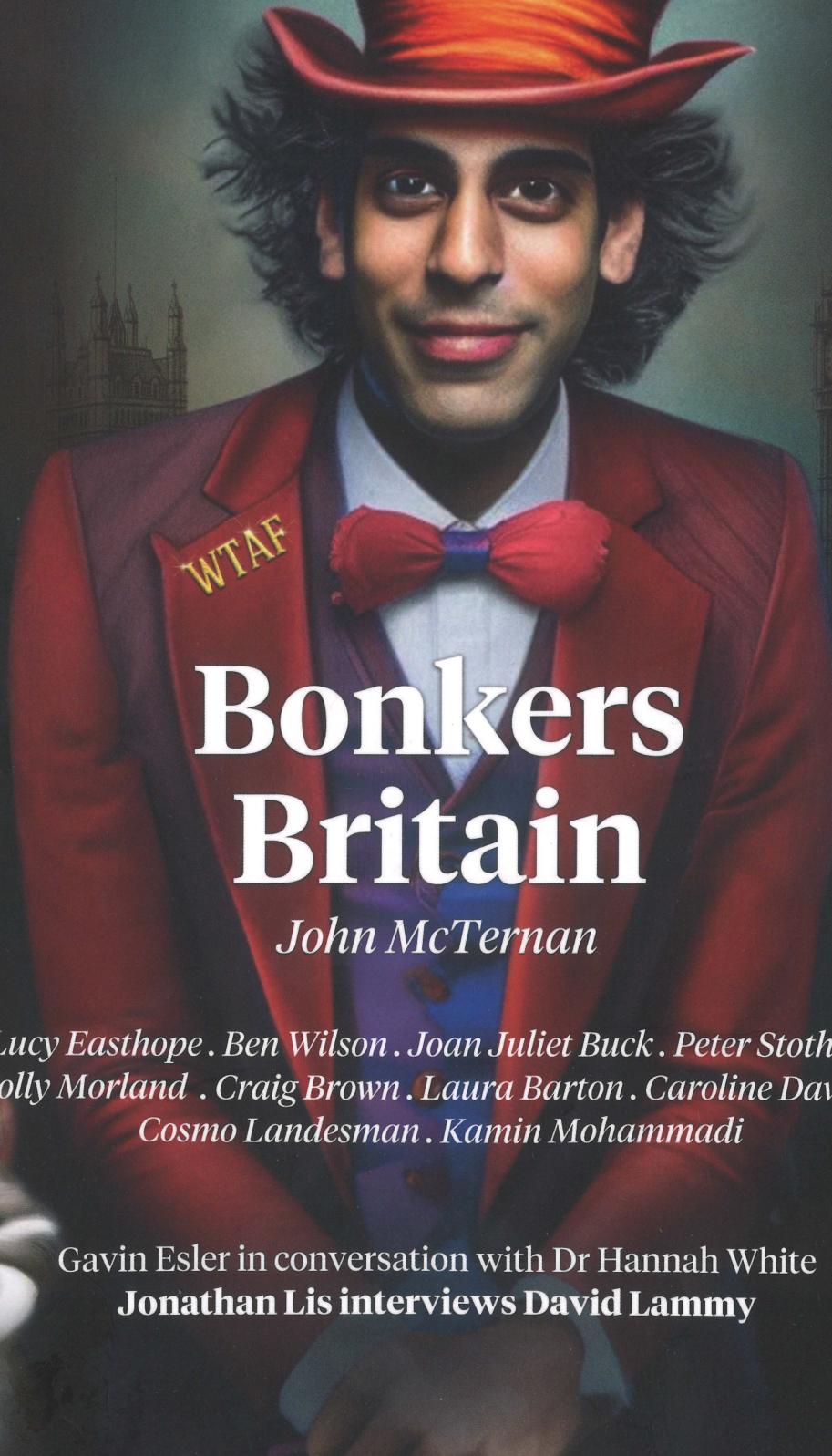


Perspective

What you say matters

November 2022 | £7.99 | perspectivemag.co.uk

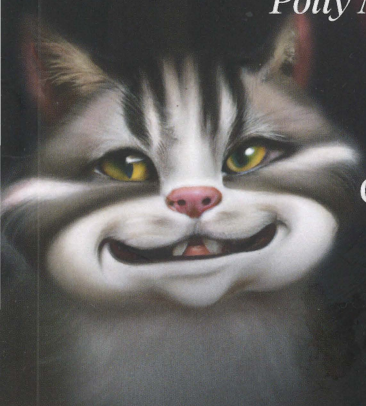


Bonkers Britain

John McTernan

*Lucy Easthope . Ben Wilson . Joan Juliet Buck . Peter Stothard
Polly Morland . Craig Brown . Laura Barton . Caroline Davison
Cosmo Landesman . Kamin Mohammadi*

Gavin Esler in conversation with Dr Hannah White
Jonathan Lis interviews David Lammy



Wade Graham's Walden

Wildfire in Portugal



Wildfires burnt over 400 square miles in Portugal by the end of August, 2022

A few days before I arrived to visit my friends at their rural place in southern Portugal, a wildfire tore through their land. It had been one of the rare days when the wind, normally a cool, moist breeze from the Atlantic, blew hard and hot from the east, from the direction of the Spanish frontier. The Portuguese like to say: *De Espanha, nem bom vento, nem bom casamento* – “From Spain comes neither good wind nor good marriage” (the latter referring to royal matches, in which the Portuguese mostly pulled the short straw), and this was one of those times.

The ignition source isn't known – it could have been a power tool sparking against a rock – but in minutes fire raced up the neighbouring valley, jumped over ridges, and spilled into side drainages, including the small valley where two years ago my friends purchased close to ten hectares of mixed woodland, brush and grassland. Wind-driven wildfire in complex topography is a mercurial thing: here it may burn hot and furious, especially when blown uphill, torching anything in its path; there it might spot and skip, missing some things in its path entirely while consuming others.

My friends were lucky. Their buildings were spared, mostly due to the aggressive, extremely laborious brush clearing they'd tasked themselves with, though a guesthouse was nearly lost when its wooden pergola caught fire, causing

several windows to shatter and almost igniting the interior. Nine-tenths of their land, though, was burned over, gutting swathes of forest, blackening hectares of brush and grass, and killing two magnificent old cork oak trees, the largest on the property. Neighbours were less fortunate, some losing structures, orchards and farms. The areas worst hit were the eucalyptus plantations, closely-planted monocultures of spindly trees crowded over hillsides that have proliferated in Iberia in recent years. In this single, relatively small fire, hundreds of hectares were torched, leaving behind a grim landscape that looked like badly singed fur.

Curiously, right next to some completely destroyed eucalyptus plantations, several cork oak woodlands lay unscathed: groves of tall, stately, spreading trees shading verdant swards of cropped grass. Each tree's trunk bore a painted white number – the year its bark was last harvested, on a nine-year cycle. The contrast was surreal, but it was deliberate, not accidental.

The fire had spoken very clearly, reading out loud the differences in the landscape – its weaknesses, imbalances, and moments of equilibrium – a script written on the land by different ways of managing it. The cork groves belong to an ancient system of mixed farming in Portugal called *montado*, which predates even the 2,000-year-old Roman presence there. While the detail differs



Wade Graham is the author of “*American Eden*, a cultural history of gardens in America”, “*Dream Cities: Seven Urban Ideas That Shape the World*” and “*Braided Waters: Environment and Society in Molokai, Hawaii*”. He is a trustee of Glen Canyon Institute in Salt Lake City and lives in Los Angeles. wadegraham.com



Firefighters battling the flames

“*Montado* is virtually fireproof, which is why productive woodlands have persisted across hot, dry, fire-prone southern Portugal”

according to the different microclimates in the region, it consists generally of carefully grazing animals under a canopy of tended, productive trees, including cork oaks, nut pines and olives, mixed with vineyards, grain fields and vegetables. The animals, whether cattle, sheep or, famously in more inland parts of the Alentejo region where my friends have settled, black pigs, graze down the native brush and aerate the soil. This encourages healthy grasses and tall trees but no “ladder fuels” as plants in between are called that can ignite and allow fire into the canopy, where it may destroy the trees. In its mature form, *montado* is virtually fireproof – which is a major reason why productive woodlands have persisted across hot, dry, fire-prone southern Portugal.

Recently though, the pressures of globalisation have conspired to decimate Portugal’s traditional *montado* lands. Small, mixed farms can’t compete against EU subsidy-fattened corporate agriculture. Families that have been on the land for centuries have increasingly been forced to sell out to the gigantic eucalyptus companies that now dominate Alentejo, and move to towns and cities, or out of the country altogether. In milder coastal areas, industrial, irrigated farms grow berries for export, using migrant labourers from South Asia. Add in the large influx of tourists and, more recently, European and American expats buying homes, and rural Portugal is being transformed, both demographically and physically. As traditional ways of land use vanish, so too does a managed landscape that has proved resilient in a climatically precarious place for thousands of years. The implications in this era of climate change aren’t good.

I stood one afternoon surveying the fire damage with Carlos, a local landscape professional from a family with deep roots in the area. He told me that until he was ten years old many families lived in these valleys, tending

trees, vines and animals. Their children attended school a quarter of a mile away, in a building that now lies abandoned. He didn’t remember any large wildfires in those years. But in the three decades since, as people sold out and moved away, fires have become commonplace.

There is some good news: consciousness of the problem is growing, together with a belief that the solution lies in returning to ancient wisdom and practices, adapted to modern times. The days of peasant agriculture are gone – and that’s good, since traditional rural life was mostly impoverished. *Montado* after all means the big house atop the hill, denoting a kind of feudalism. Recently, Portuguese researchers have developed new technologies and uses for cork, opening new markets for landowners, including smallholders, even as wine corks are being replaced by aluminium screw tops and plastic.

In the wake of the fire, my friends have a new plan: they will plant more cork oaks, olives and vines, but will turn over brush-clearing duties to a small flock of sheep, which will be moved deliberately through the year, helping to re-establish the balance between nature and culture in the valley.

But the efforts of small landowners like them, however enlightened, will not be enough to stop the collapse of that balance on the larger scale – not in Alentejo, not in Portugal, not anywhere – without meaningful change in misguided policies. The list begins with the EU’s mendacious and destructive mandate calling woodburning for power “renewable” [which I wrote about in *Perspective* Issue 20, “The Tree Stealers”], and continues with the common agricultural policy’s blanket supports for factory farming, and the Social Darwinist ideology of unfettered free trade – all of which create crushing competitive disadvantages for small local producers who want to do the right thing by their land and their culture.